

# Child Support Commissioner System Receives High Marks

On May 5, 2000, the Judicial Council released to the Legislature its evaluation of California's child support commissioner system. The report, which analyzes the work of child support commissioners and family law facilitators throughout the state, documents the successes of the system and identifies barriers to achieving its goals. Overall, the study found that the child support commissioner system has been implemented statewide and is working as intended.

The child support commissioner system was established in 1997 by Assembly Bill 1058. Subsequently, in 1998, the Legislature passed Assembly Bill 2498, which directed the council to evaluate the system's efficiency, reduction of conflict, and cost-effectiveness. In response, the council convened a workgroup to lay the groundwork for an evaluation of the child support commissioner system. The workgroup surveyed all 58 counties, and 11 of them (accounting for 61 percent of California's popu-

lation) were studied in depth. The counties selected for the in-depth study were Glenn, Fresno, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Diego, Santa Clara, Shasta, Sutter, Tulare, and Ventura.

The council collected data for the report in multiple ways. Court statistics were collected from the study counties that had automated data systems and were then analyzed. Independent, non-Judicial Council researchers facilitated six focus groups consisting of child support commissioners, family law facilitators, and district attorneys from the study counties. These groups provided qualitative data on program strengths and weaknesses, obstacles to optimal program performance, and strategies for overcoming barriers and improving the program.

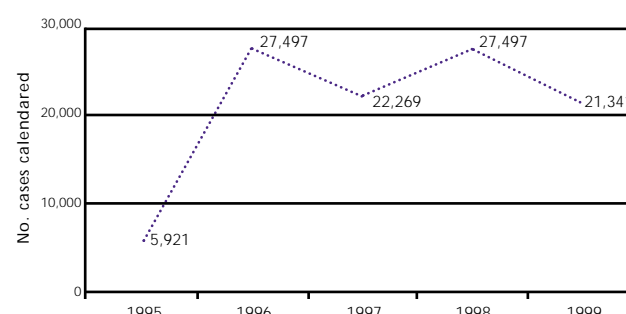
The council's workgroup surveyed the child support commissioners and family law facilitators in every county to document local changes and enhancements to the resources, facilities, services, and procedures

used by child support courts and family law facilitators as a result of AB 1058. In addition, the report reflects information gathered on the professional qualifications, experience, and customer satisfaction of child support commissioners and facilitators.

called for in AB 1058. Within one year of implementation, the number of cases calendared for hearing quadrupled, from 5,921 in 1995 to 27,497 in 1996 (see figure).

"The addition of child support commissioners and family law facilitators at local courts has helped to move cases along at a much faster rate," says Dennis Umanzio, the acting child support commissioner for Sutter, Yolo, and Yuba Counties. "Documents are signed quicker, hear-

District attorney family support cases calendared for hearing increased in San Diego County as a result of child support commissioners.



The report identifies the following strengths of the child support commissioner system:

- ❖ Child support commissioners are established in all California counties but one, and family law facilitator offices are in place in every county. Changes in forms and procedures as a result of AB 1058 have increased the efficiency of case processing.

- ❖ Before assuming their roles in the program, on average commissioners practiced family law for approximately 13 years, and family law facilitators practiced family law for approximately 12 years.

- ❖ Families' access to the child support process has been significantly increased because of the assistance and information provided by family law facilitators.

- ❖ Speed and efficiency in the processing of child support cases in courts have improved as a result of assistance from family law facilitators.

- ❖ Conflict between parties was reduced as a result of family law facilitators' efforts to educate litigants on the child support process and help parents work out child support agreements.

- ❖ Good working relationships between district attorneys, child support commissioners, and family law facilitators have led to greater efficiency and less conflict among these system partners.

- ❖ Available data on customer satisfaction show an almost totally positive response.

- ❖ Focus group participants believe the system is cost-effective because of the efficiencies it creates in the child support system.

The report also contains detailed statistics in relation to individual courts. For example, the evaluation shows that, in late 1995, San Diego County implemented its own child support commissioner system, which contained all of the major elements

ings are set sooner, and cases are heard in a more efficient manner. That translates into increased access to the court for all parties involved."

In addition to the strengths identified, the evaluation recommends some improvements to the child support commissioner system, including the following actions:

- ❖ Work toward ensuring that court information required by the Judicial Branch Statistical Information System (JBSIS) is provided for child support cases;

- ❖ Implement data collection and reporting from family law facilitators;

- ❖ Emphasize and encourage courts to move toward uniformity in handling child support cases;

- ❖ Encourage courts to explore procedures to improve the sharing of data with local child support agencies; and

- ❖ At the state level, participate in coordinating the efforts of the judiciary, the new California Department of Child Support Services (CDCSS), and the Franchise Tax Board in the child support enforcement system.

To address uniformity issues, the Judicial Council worked with the CDCSS in convening a statewide conference June 28-30 with the goal of increasing the statewide consistency of procedures within the system. Invitees to the conference included child support commissioners, Title IV-D court clerks, family law facilitators, district attorneys' staffs, and representatives from the CDCSS, Franchise Tax Board, and federal Office of Child Support Enforcement.

- For more information, visit the California Courts Web site at [www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/childrenandthecourts/](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/childrenandthecourts/), or contact Bonnie Hough, 415-865-7668; e-mail: [bonnie.hough@jud.ca.gov](mailto:bonnie.hough@jud.ca.gov). ■

## Reaching Out to Students

Larry Warren has been going to the courthouse in Sacramento County for more than 10 years. But he is not a judge, an attorney, part of the court staff, or a litigant. Mr. Warren is a 12th-grade teacher at Hiram Johnson High School in Sacramento.

At the end of every school year, Mr. Warren, in coordination with the Superior Court of Sacramento County, prepares his students and takes them on a two-day field trip focused on the court system, called "Government in Action." The group for this year's trip consisted of 120 students.

The kids had the opportunity to tour the courthouse and talk with Elinor Gardner, the interpreters coordinator, and Meredith Bostian, the jury commissioner. In addition, they met with Judge Patricia Esgro, who prepared a fictitious complaint so that they could role-play and get an idea of what a real trial would be like. After this brief introduction to trial procedure, the kids were allowed to observe numerous real-life trials.

Besides the courthouse tour, the students visited Central Valley Bail Bonds and were given a brief presentation on the process surrounding bail bonds and the bonds' relationship to the court system. The students also got to observe court proceedings in progress at the local jail.

- For more information, contact Lisa Vincent, 916-874-4501; e-mail: [vincent@saccourt.com](mailto:vincent@saccourt.com).



Larry Warren directs his high school students outside the Superior Court of Sacramento County courthouse. Photo: Courtesy of the Superior Court of Sacramento County



# Judicial Council Releases Domestic Violence Study

In May 2000 the Judicial Council released to the California Legislature *Domestic Violence Courts: A Descriptive Study*, a report on domestic violence courts in the state. It describes what courts are doing to meet the challenge of domestic violence and suggests several areas for future consideration.

Two major themes emerged during the research:

◆ Courts throughout the state have responded to the challenge of domestic violence cases in a variety of different ways, making it difficult to identify only one model or one definition of domestic violence courts.

◆ The major feature that unifies domestic violence courts is that they seek to enhance the safety of victims and children and to ensure that batterers are held accountable for their actions.

In the report, the term *domestic violence courts* refers to courts that hear a special domestic violence calendar, regardless of whether those cases are heard exclusively or as part

of a mixed assignment. Using both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from spring 1999 through winter 2000, the report describes:

◆ Policies and procedures of 39 courts in 31 of California's 58 counties that meet the definition of a domestic violence court in Family Code section 6390.

◆ Responses to a survey of domestic violence courts and professionals in the field of domestic violence. The responses reveal multiple objectives for the establishment of specialized procedures to handle domestic violence cases. These objectives include enhancing victim safety, holding batterers accountable, improving case management, and making more efficient use of resources.

◆ Survey responses that identify potential obstacles to implementing domestic violence courts. These obstacles include limited resources, current policies and procedures, training and education, resistance of key participants, and case characteristics.

# Nominations Open for Kleps Awards

**T**he Judicial Council is accepting applications for the 2000 Ralph N. Kleps Awards for Improvement in the Administration of the Courts. These annual awards were created in 1991 in honor of Ralph N. Kleps, the first administrative director of the California courts. They recognize and honor the contributions made by individual courts to the administration of justice.

The awards are given in five categories, as follows:

**Category 1: Counties with 0 to 7.9 judicial position equivalents (JPEs)**

**Category 2: Counties with  
8.0 to 23.9 JPEs**

**Category 3: Counties with  
24.0 to 99.9 JPEs**

Category 4: Counties with 100 or more JPEs

**Category 5: Cross-county projects that involve two or more counties working in cooperation on a single program**

Programs nominated for Kleps awards are judged on the following criteria. (1) The program improves the administration of the courts and reflects the intent of at least one of the goals of the Judicial Council's Long-Range Strategic Plan (access, fairness, and diversity; independence and accountability; modernization; quality of justice and service to the public; education; technology). (2) The activity is

innovative. (3) The program is transferable to other courts. (4) The program has been in operation for at least one year.

The California Judicial Administration Conference Planning Committee will review nominations and submit recommendations to the Judicial Council, which will determine the award recipients at its December 2000 meeting. Committee members and staff plan to make site visits to courts that have applied for Kleps awards, which will help the committee to make informed recommendations to the council.

Applications were sent out in mid-June and are due by August 9. The awards will be presented at the California Judicial Administration Conference, scheduled for January 31–February 3, 2001, where award recipients will be invited to demonstrate and/or display their projects.

● For more information, contact Shawn Landry, 415-865-7628; e-mail: [shawn.landry@jud.ca.gov](mailto:shawn.landry@jud.ca.gov).

Send applications to:  
Administrative Office  
of the Courts  
Attn: Shawn Landry, Trial  
Court Programs Division  
455 Golden Gate Avenue  
San Francisco, California  
94102-3660 ■

### Numbers of Courts (out of 39) That Assigned Case Types to a Specialized Division or Calendar

Case Types	Assigned All Cases	Assigned Some Cases	Assigned No Cases
<b>Civil Cases</b>			
Domestic Violence Protection Act (DVPA) orders	26	4	9
Divorce (with related DVPA order or DV criminal case)	15	0	24
Custody and visitation (with related DVPA order or DV criminal case)	17	0	22
Paternity and child support (with related DVPA order or DV criminal case)	15	1	23
<b>Criminal Cases</b>			
Domestic violence misdemeanors	19	3	17
Domestic violence felonies	9	4	26

*Domestic Violence Courts: A Descriptive Study* serves as a summary of current procedures representing the courts' efforts to enhance the safety of children and victims, ensure the accountability of batterers, and improve

the administration and accessibility of justice.

● For more information on the study, contact Julia Weber, 415-865-7693; e-mail: [julia.weber@jud.ca.gov](mailto:julia.weber@jud.ca.gov). ■

# CountyProfile

## Shasta



The Shasta County Courthouse in Redding was dedicated in 1957, and an annex was added in 1965. *Photo: Courtesy of the Superior Court of Shasta County*

**Geographic area:** 3,846 square miles; 160 miles north of Sacramento and 100 miles south of the Oregon border

**Population:** 175,777, making it the 28th largest county in the state

**Population growth:** By 2020 the population is expected to grow to 240,975

## Demographics:

Age: 0-19 ≈ 29%; 20-39 ≈ 25%; 40-59 ≈ 27%; 60-79 ≈ 15%; 80+ ≈ 4%  
Race/Ethnicity: White ≈ 89%; Hispanic ≈ 5%; Asian or Pacific Islander ≈ 3%; American Indian ≈ 2%; Black ≈ 1%

**Number of court locations: 2**

**Number of authorized judges: 9**

**Number of staff:** 144 (including judges, commissioners, and deputy marshals)

**Caseload:** Filings for 1998–1999 totaled 49,402

**Annual operating budget:** \$7,157,331 as of January 2000

**Presiding judge:** Hon. Bradley L. Boeckman

**Executive officer:** Ms. Susan Null

**Of note:** The county is home to Shasta Dam, which has the highest overflow spillway in the world. It dams four rivers to form Shasta Lake, the largest lake in California.

*Sources:* Superior Court of Shasta County; U.S. Census Bureau; California State Department of Finance



## In the News

# Court Takes Time-Out for Teacher

The Superior Court of Orange County's recent outreach to a class of kindergarten students not only garnered goodwill in the community but earned praise in the media as well.

An article that appeared in the May 15 issue of the *San Francisco Daily Journal*, titled "Both Court and Class Recess," describes how 19 kindergarten students from Rancho Cañada Elementary School in Lake Forest received a crash course in courtroom dynamics, courtesy of the Superior Court of Orange County. The children also got to see firsthand why their much-loved teacher had been absent from class while serving as a juror in a trial estimated to last six months.

The story explains that the students were very upset when their teacher, Toni Grotsky, began serving on a jury in March. So they launched a campaign to write letters begging the court to let their teacher come back to school. Parents drafted the let-

ters and mailed them along with photos of grinning kindergartners. Although Judge Francisco Firmat denied the children's request, he put the trial on hold for an hour one day to let them and their parents visit with Ms. Grotsky in the courtroom. He also invited the group into his chambers and emphasized to them the importance of their teacher's civic duty.

Other court-related programs that have received media attention in recent months:

Child Care in San Mateo County A story titled "Courthouse Offers Childcare for Visitors" describes the children's waiting room at the Superior Court of San Mateo County's Hall of Justice.

*Enquirer Bulletin* (Belmont), April 5, 2000

Juror Appreciation in San Joaquin County During Juror Appreciation Week, Stockton's daily newspaper published "Employers Are Appreciated, Too," an article written by



Juror Toni Grotsky's kindergarten class visited Judge Firmat's chambers, where he explained to them the importance of jury duty and assured them that their teacher would return soon. Photo: Hugh Williams, Copyright 2000 Daily Journal Corp.; reprinted with permission

Superior Court of San Joaquin County Judge William J. Murray, Jr., and Jury Assembly Room Supervisor Helen Varela to recognize and thank jurors and their employers.

*The Record* (Stockton), May 13, 2000

CASAs in the South Bay A story titled "Advocates Ensure a Kid's Day in Court Isn't a Nightmare" details the beneficial work of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties.

*San Jose Mercury News*, May 24, 2000 ■

## Women of Color in the Courts

The emerging role of women of color as leaders and managers in California courts was the focus of a two-day conference held in conjunction with the California Continuing Judicial Studies Program in May. The statewide conference, titled "The New Millennium: Women of Color as Court Leaders and Managers," was presented by the Judicial Council's Access and Fairness Advisory Committee in association with the California Center for Judicial Education and Research. It offered a unique opportunity for women of color and other interested individuals to come together to discuss this issue and explore what they can do to facilitate change.

More than 80 individuals attended the conference, including judges, court administrators, court managers and staff, Administrative Office of the Courts staff, and law school representatives. The participants explored how to identify, as well as how to develop strategies for responding to, the stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination that affect women of color. They examined approaches for the recruitment, selection, promotion, and retention of women of color. In addition, the conference addressed the impacts of institutional racism and sexism on women of color.

Based on the success of the conference and on positive feedback from attendees, the Women of Color Subcommittee of the Access and Fairness Advisory Committee is exploring the possibility of conducting a national conference within the next two years. At a minimum, if the national conference does not materialize, the subcommittee will hold another conference in northern California.

The subcommittee is drafting a report of the May conference that will be posted on the advisory committee home page at [www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/access/](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/access/). It is also examining ways, such as an electronic bulletin board, for conference participants and other interested parties from the courts and the public to keep in contact.

● For more information, contact Clifford Alumno, 415-865-7683; e-mail: [clifford.alumno@jud.ca.gov](mailto:clifford.alumno@jud.ca.gov).



Luncheon speaker Senator Martha Escutia addresses the challenges facing women of color.

## Yolo County Celebrates Law Day 2000

California Deputy Attorney General Gordon "Sam" Overton was one of five featured panelists at a program focused on "diversity in the workplace" at a Law Day 2000 celebration in Yolo County. Other panelists at the May 1 event included Tommie Goss, Human Resources and Development Manager of the Distribution Center in Woodland, California; Margie Costa, Best Practices Manager of Valley Media in Woodland, California; Professor Martha West of the Martin Luther King, Jr., School of Law, University of California at Davis; and attorney Larry Hoppin, Vice-President of the Yolo County Bar Association. The panel addressed law school alumni, members of the local bar, and city and county officials.

Mr. Overton is one of the authors of rule 989.3 of the California Rules of Court, which establishes procedures for providing accommodations in the courts for persons with disabilities. He was appointed to the Judicial Council's Access and Fairness Advisory Committee in 1994 and is the chair of its Subcommittee on Persons With

Disabilities and the vice-chair of its Subcommittee on Sexual Orientation. Mr. Overton expressed that it is essential for California courthouses to be sensitive to the needs of the physically challenged. He also stressed the importance of ensuring equal access to the judicial system.

The program, held at the Martin Luther King, Jr., School of Law at the University of California at Davis, was sponsored by the law school, the Superior Court of Yolo County, and the Yolo County Bar Association.



Yolo County Law Day 2000 panelists (clockwise from left rear): Tommie Goss, Human Resources and Development Manager of the Distribution Center; Margie Costa, Best Practices Manager of Valley Media; Professor Martha West, University of California at Davis Law School; attorney Larry Hoppin, Vice-President of the Yolo County Bar Association and Law Day chair; Professor Richard Wydick, University of California at Davis Law School; and Deputy Attorney General Sam Overton. Photo: Courtesy of the Superior Court of Yolo County